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COLUMBIA COUNTY

AGRICULTURE

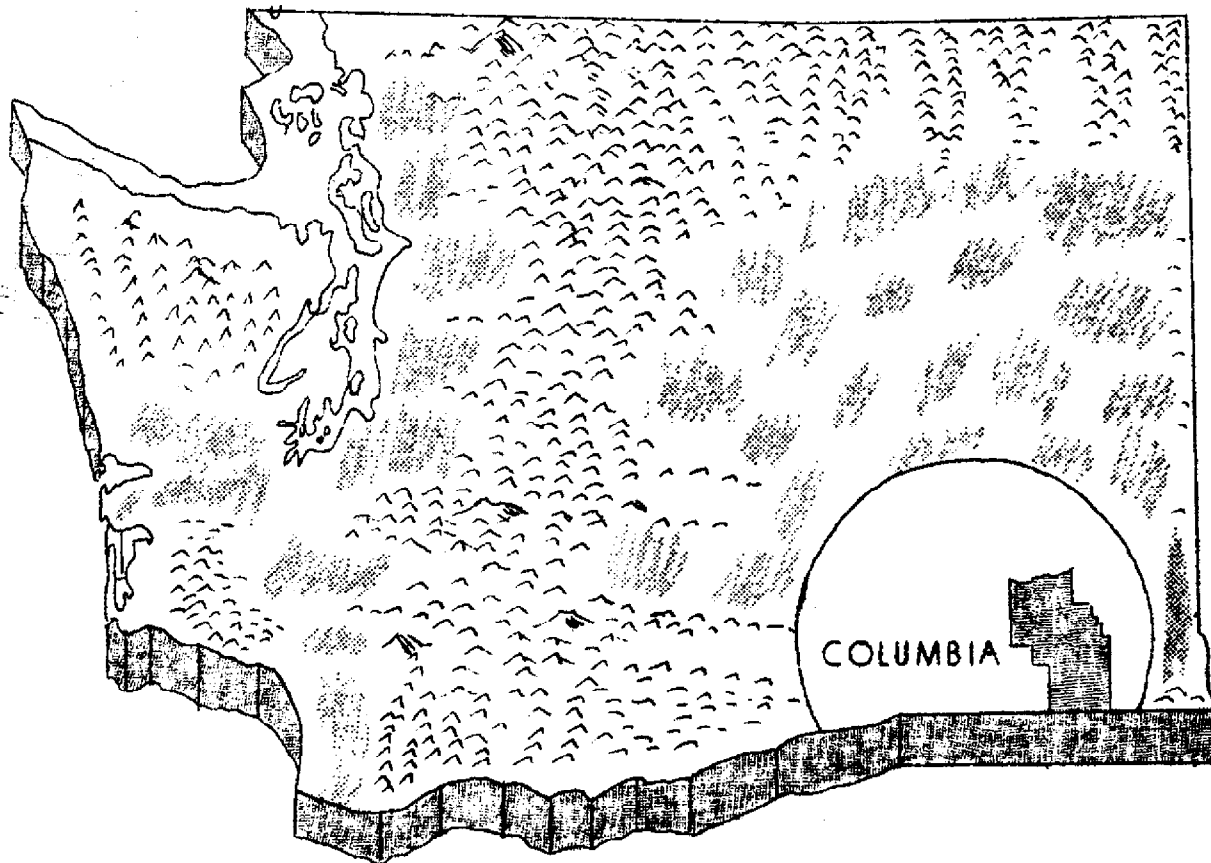
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COUNTY AGRICULTURAL DATA SERIES
1956



WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
J. D. Dwyer, Director

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Agricultural Marketing Service
S. R. Newell

WASHINGTON CROP AND LIVESTOCK REPORTING SERVICE
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FOREWORD

This book on Columbia County is one of an original series being devoted to the history and present nature of agriculture in each of the thirty-nine counties of the State of Washington. This project was initiated in 1956 through funds made available by Sverre N. Omdahl, Director, Washington State Department of Agriculture, 1948-56. State funds were matched by moneys from the United States Department of Agriculture under the Research and Marketing Act of 1946.

County agricultural data books are intended to serve a variety of needs. Continually changing conditions in a dynamic state such as Washington require constant planning by groups and individuals both in private enterprise and public service. Comprehensive knowledge of land resources, population and agricultural-economic trends in a local area such as Columbia County is of great value. This book will be useful for reference in public and private instruction by vocational agriculture and social studies teachers in Columbia County schools. It has been devised also to inform adults interested in knowing more about their immediate area, as well as persons and enterprises concerned with agricultural production and marketing or prospective settlement and investment in the county.

Carefully selected geographic facts, agricultural history, population trends and statistical data are included to give an over-all appreciation of Columbia County. The enumerations of the United States Censuses of Population and Agriculture since 1880 and recent estimates of the Washington State Census Board are summarized to give a perspective of development since the establishment of Columbia County in 1875. Facts on topography, soil, climate and forests which influence farming are integrated from surveys and reports of government agencies. Estimates of leading crops by years since 1939 by the Washington Crop and Livestock Reporting Service provide a measure of the trend in the agriculture of the county farm industry.

Acknowledgment is accorded the professional work of several persons. Immediate direction was under Emery C. Wilcox, Agricultural Statistician in Charge, Estimates Division, Agricultural Marketing Service, United States Department of Agriculture. Supervision, research and cartographic illustration was performed by Dr. Woodrow R. Clevinger, Market Analyst, Washington State Department of Agriculture. Lloyd J. Mercer, graduate student in Agricultural Economics, Washington State University and resident of Addy, Stevens County, wrote the sections on pattern of agriculture, crops, livestock and marketing and collected much original information. Mr. Richard Perry, of the Washington State Department of Agriculture, and Leonard W. Orvold, D. W. Barrowman, Agricultural Statisticians, Agricultural Marketing Service, United States Department of Agriculture, gave valuable assistance. The clerical staff of the Washington Crop and Livestock Reporting Service prepared tabular material for the book.

J. D. Dwyer, Director
Washington State Department of Agriculture

Olympia, Washington
October 1, 1959

Funds for this bulletin provided by the Washington State Department of Agriculture were matched by the United States Department of Agriculture under the Research and Marketing Act of 1946.

PART I

History of Columbia County Agriculture

Introduction

Columbia County includes the Tucannon River and upper Touchet River valleys of the Blue Mountains region of southeastern Washington. It is in the lower drainage basin of the Snake River. With an area of 860 square miles (approximately 550,400 acres), Columbia is thirty-first in size among the thirty-nine Washington counties.

In employment and general economy, Columbia is predominantly an agricultural county. It is primarily a commercial crop farming region specializing in wheat and green field peas with a livestock industry secondary. Columbia County usually ranks among the top ten wheat and barley producing counties in the state. It ranks second in the state in pea production and is third in the United States. In livestock production it ranked twenty-fifth in 1954 in value of sales among Washington counties.

Wheat, barley and peas along with an expanding beef cattle industry place Columbia County eighteenth among Washington counties in value of agricultural products marketed. The Census of Agriculture in 1954 reported that Columbia County farms produced and sold over \$9,390,000 worth of crops and livestock during that year. Wheat sales alone accounted for over \$6,000,000. Columbia County farms are generally large, well managed, high-income commercial units. Productivity per farm is exceptionally high as is shown by the fact that although farm sales are the eighteenth highest in the state, the rural farm population of 1,520 is only thirty-third among Washington counties.

History 1/

Columbia County, named for the great "River of the West", was created by Act of the Washington Territorial Legislature, November 11, 1875. It was organized from the eastern part of Walla Walla County. Dayton, the trade center of a pioneer wheat farming region, was established as the county seat by popular election.

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Columbia County was settled relatively late in Washington history. Joint claims to the region by the United States and Great Britain prior to 1846 and the Indian hostility up until 1860 discouraged permanent settlement of the interior grasslands of eastern Washington. As a result, the rangelands of Columbia County were frequented only occasionally by stockmen prior to 1860. Indian bands of the Nez Perce, Palouse, Walla Walla, Cayuse and Snake tribes roved the area, migrating widely on horseback, grazing livestock, hunting and fishing. Springs and ponds along the Touchet, Tucannon, Patit and Snake Rivers provided camping sites. Horses were one of their main trade items.

Indian hostility began in the Walla Walla Valley with the Whitman Massacre in 1847. The following year a regiment of Oregon riflemen under Colonel Cornelius Gilliam skirmished with a band of Palouse Indians near the present site of Dayton and after dispersing the Indians returned to Oregon. The next few years saw several major campaigns fought in eastern Washington. By 1870 the Nez Perce, last of the hostile Indian nations, had accepted peace. Most of the Indians agreed to move onto the Yakima, Colville, Spokane and Umatilla Reservations and the way was then open for stockmen and agricultural settlers to move into the grasslands of southeastern Washington.

Agricultural settlement of the Columbia County started in 1859. Among the first arrivals were two brothers, Henry and Jesse Day, who brought a herd of cattle from Oregon in 1859 and settled on the Touchet River at the present site of Dayton. The city of Dayton was founded by Jesse Day in 1871. Other ranchers originating in Oregon arrived in 1859 and 1860. Settlement continued throughout the 1860's with most of the valley land along the streams being settled and cultivated by 1864. Very few of these early settlers came with a view of establishing permanent homes in the Blue Mountains area. Most of them were footloose stockmen looking for rangelands, their aim being to graze cattle for a few years and then to return east with the profits of their venture.

About 1864 it was discovered that the Palouse Hills soil was as fertile and valuable for grain growing as was the bottom lands along the streams. This discovery was followed by an immigration of settlers to grow wheat. A steady flow of people arrived in the late 1860's and the early 1870's. Not only was the acreage of grain increased but the first orchards were planted. Because of the almost non-existent transportation facilities, there was no outlet for grain. However, the county's livestock industry was such that, despite the transportation handicap, the area prospered. A number of wagon roads were

1/ This historical summary has been derived from four sources:

- (1) Washington, A Guide to the Evergreen State (American Guide Series), Writers Program, Works Progress Administration. Published by the Washington Historical Society.
- (2) Richard M. Perry, The Counties of Washington, State of Washington, Secretary of State, Olympia, Washington (Mimeographed 1943).
- (3) An Illustrated History of Southeastern Washington Including Walla Walla, Columbia, Garfield and Asotin Counties, State of Washington, Western Historical Publishing Company, 1904.
- (4) The Western Canner and Packer, October 1951, pp. 14-15. Historical notes on Green Giant Company's canning operations at Dayton, Waitsburg and Pomeroy.

built, starting in 1862 with the Walla Walla to Lewiston road. While some of the county's wheat did move over these roads or by water transport on the Snake River, it was not until the coming of the railroad that wheat production reached its potential.

The first railroad line came to Columbia County in 1881, the Oregon Railroad and Navigation Company railway reaching Dayton in July of that year. Following this the open-range period began to end with the arrival of large numbers of homesteaders and land buyers interested in growing wheat. Columbia County's hills rapidly became dotted with grain fields. A second railroad line reached Dayton in November, 1889. By 1890 over 1,500,000 bushels of wheat and 500,000 bushels of other grains were being produced annually.

The greatest influx of immigration into the Tucannon and Touchet Valleys was over by 1890. In that year 6,709 people resided in the county. By 1910 this total had grown to 7,042 with the peak population in the county reached about 1900. Dryland wheat agriculture using summer-fallow followed by winter wheat became a highly successful type of farming. However, once the arable land of the county had been settled, the number of farms and farm population began to decrease as individual farms became larger. The peak number of farms was reached about 1900, when 706 farms were reported in the county. Through consolidation this number had declined to 622 by 1920 and 356 by 1954.

Eastern Washington wheat prosperity began to decline in the late 1920's as a result of low prices and world-wide surpluses of wheat. With the depression years of the 1930's and poor market outlets after 1929, less wheat was produced and prices decreased by over one-half between 1929 and 1931.

The sharp decrease in farm income from cash grain sales caused great changes in the county's agriculture and general population. Considerable dryland acreage was abandoned and some farm people moved to urban industrial areas. Partly as a result of decreased opportunities in farming, Columbia County's population dropped from about 7,100 in 1900 to 5,500 in 1940. Many smaller wheat farms were abandoned, sold or through increased mechanization, were consolidated with other farms to form larger units. This also created labor surpluses and many farm workers went into other fields of employment in other parts of the Pacific Northwest.

Beginning in the early 1930's Columbia County agriculture became more diversified with the development of commercial vegetable farming, chiefly for processing. In 1929, F. C. Sloan of Walla Walla County began growing green peas for canning with high success in that county. This crop moved to Columbia County soon afterward and in 1934 the Blue Mountain Canneries located a pea cannery at Dayton. By 1954, about 15,000 acres of green peas were being grown for processing. The region became one of the leading American cannery pea producers. Asparagus became another major vegetable crop in Columbia County. By 1954, Columbia County growers were producing processing vegetable crops worth over \$1,200,000, making their sales the fourth highest in the state. The county became the nation's third ranking county in green pea production, behind Umatilla County, Oregon and Walla Walla County.

Columbia County now has a well developed farm economy based mainly on wheat, commercial vegetables for processing and beef cattle. Agricultural

development has been encouraged and guided by several agencies and private enterprises. Technical guidance in improvement of grain and processor vegetable growing was furnished by the State College of Washington Experiment Stations: the Dryland Experiment Station at Lind and the Irrigation Experiment Station at Prosser. Assistance in plant industry and animal husbandry also was received from County Extension Service Agents of the State College Extension Service.

Private agencies which have influenced expansion or improvement of farm commodity groups within the county include a number of local and state associations. Among these are the fieldmen of the major canning companies, the Washington Crop Improvement Association, the Washington Cattlemen's Association and the Washington Pea Growers Association.